A Man of No Reputation

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Brian Q. Newcomb

Godric, the reluctant saint in Frederick Buechner's Pulitzer-nominated novel, is a character that came to mind when inteviewing Rich Mullins some years ago. Talking with Rich then, and observing his music ministry since, the two have become linked in my mind.

In the novel, the biographer fails to include all his subject's honest failings, saying, "For the sake of him who is himself the Truth, I leave some small truths out." The desire to see religious leaders, and even musicians, as something better or holier than they really are is a common failing. We prefer to see as sinless or at least closer to God than we ourselves, those who guide and inspire us.

Thus, Godric is praised and remembered not for his humanity and sinfulness, but for his spiritual austerity and humility. Sadly, Rich Mullins is remembered the same way.

Best known for early praise favorites like "Awesome God" and Amy Grant's hit "Sing Your Praise to the Lord", his later albums raised expectations that Rich's best work was yet to come. Alas, his legacy has only one more chapter: The Jesus Record, an album of his songs recorded posthumously by The Ragamuffin Band - Rick Elias, Jimmy Abegg, Mark Robertson and Aaron Smith.

"Here's what sparked the making of the record," says Elias, the project's producer, as we gather in a hotel room to discuss this final collection. "In the week after Rich died, we gathered together from the first night to the last night, after the Wichita memorial. That crowd seemed to grow. People remembering, laughing and crying; it was a healing time. At the end of that week, people were coming up and saying, This music should be heard." Adds Abegg, "Until that point, we were the only ones who had heard the songs."

"The songs were just incredible," continues Elias. "Had he made the record

himself, it would stand up as one of his finest. Beyond that, his audience had not had an opportunity for closure. The entire focus of the record is giving people that chance."

The Ragamuffins have been with Rich since his 1993 release with the band in the title. According to Abegg, in many ways The Jesus Record is the culmination of their experiences both on A Liturgy, A Legacy and A Ragamuffin Band and Brother's Keeper. "[Liturgy] was a planned attack. That record was, architecturally speaking, well made. Rich was a fabulous writer, and we would piece together an arrangement as a band that made all the sense we could muster."

Brother's Keeper was a different scenario. Abegg continues, "Rich came to town with 10 songs: This is it, you guys are producing, which meant nobody was producing. Rich had exactly two weeks to do the record. It was the opposite of what he meant it to be. The record suffered in the making, not in the design."

So, for two years Rich planned The Jesus Record; from the beginning Elias was appointed leader of the production. "Two weeks after I heard the demos, we were to start pre-production," Abegg says. "We were going to work together on the arrangements. When I hear the newest songs, I'm stunned. I feel that the very best was about to occur; his tragic dismissal from this planet was completely shocking to me."

Rich conceived The Jesus Record as a collaborative band effort, all the players writing and singing their own songs. The design was to explore the person and meaning of Christ. "He wanted it to be an intense challenge to us," Robertson says. "He was trying to get us to consider something he thought we needed to explore. He told me he thought we all needed a rebirth."

While the original plan was that everyone would write, only Robertson's co-written "Surely God Is With Us" and Elias' "Man of No Reputation" were presented to Rich before the accident. They appear on the album; the bulk of the album is written or co-written by Rich. Exclaims Robertson, "He hit a point where he was so prolific the last few months of his life. It gives me the sense now that the flame was burning super bright because it was going to go out, although it weirds me out to say it."

Listening to "You Did Not Have a Home" and "All the Way to Kingdom

Come", songs where Rich describes the broken frailty of the human experience, it's as if he was describing himself as well as expressing how he saw Jesus. "It's a funny thing the way art works," says Abegg. "Art is a mirror of humankind at its most basic level. I listened to 'Man of No Reputation' again today; I've heard that song a thousand times, but for the first time I heard it referencing Rich. It was how he saw himself, and how he made me see him. Hey, the guy moved to New Mexico and built a hogan (earth-covered Navajo dwelling) on the dirt, and lived in a shack."

The Ragamuffins laugh at that; not even a week had gone by before he was calling them and complaining that no one would come for a visit. Rich, they say, often sought to embody new ideas in his pursuit of spirituality and faithfulness. "He never thought of something and thought, Naw, probably not a good idea," Abegg says. "He always thought, This is it and went straight for it and somehow achieved it, recklessly or not, and then he'd go, This ain't it and move on. It was uncanny. I loved that activitity."

But Rich was committed to the concept and songs for The Jesus Record. Says Elias, "I honestly believe he wrote the way most great writers write - they write for themselves. I think he thought, How can I force myself to meditate on the mind of Christ for four months? I know, make Christ my job; I'll make it my gig. Beyond that, he extended to us this assignment and challenge. Early, I heard one of the songs and said, That's a hit. He looked at me and said, I don't care if it's a hit, we've got to do this. And I, of course, felt like a moron. Just saying that, I was missing the point."

When it came to recording, time spent in the studio wasn't a wake. "People may find it hard to believe," admits Robertson, "but it was fun to arrange this record. We had a good time doing it."

"They weren't morose sessions," agrees Elias. "I know he wouldn't have wanted that. On a record like this, there was a lot of work involved. Being able to do that enabled us to relax and have some fun in there. There were a few emotional moments, but they were far fewer than I would have imagined."

To many, Rich Mullins had become a spiritual icon, with monk-like attributes. "I believe Rich hated the person he had become in the minds of many," Abegg says. "He was starting to put his foot down, and Brother's Keeper was the first time he did. It was his intention to live all of the multiplicity of his life in its fullest. It's not like Rich picked any of (his

success), it picked him."

While fans may have put him on a pedestal, Rich acknowledged his humanness with band-mates. "A tangent on the St. Rich thing," adds Robertson, "the fact that Rich was messed up in some ways glorifies God more than anything. That weird paradox that was Rich really shows God's amazing goodness. I don't pretend to know God's thoughts, but you get the sense of a character like Jonah that, despite himself, God - whether Rich wanted it or not - wanted to use him for something exceptional. That doesn't deify Rich, it points to the grace of Christ."

"And he was getting bolder as he got older," Elias says. "You reach a point when you can overcome the desire for approval, when you get to the point where this is the right thing to do. Rich was getting to that point. We were seeing a guy coming into himself."

"Rich was in mid-career, that needs to be said," suggests Abegg. "He wasn't wearing a seat belt. He died in a car accident. He was growing as an artist. He had a lot he wanted to say."

"Aaron said this perfectly the other day," Elias says. "People are starting to realize we lost something pretty incredible. We didn't just lose another talented writer; we lost a very significant person."

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